

ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT A CONVERSAZIONE

— OF THE —



Progressive Society of Ottawa,

27th DECEMBER, 1877.



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I do not know how I can more fitly occupy the time that has been placed at my disposal this evening, than by relating briefly, for the information of those in the audience to whom the facts may not be fully known, how this Society came into existence, and by defining, as I understand them, the objects which it strives to accomplish and the position which it aims at occupying. I do not stand here as an authoritative exponent of the views or feelings of the members of the Society; and yet, I am not without hope, that what I have to say will command their assent and their sympathy; and that my task of definition will be regarded and accepted as a contribution towards the evolution of the true ideal of the organization we all prize so much.

Some years have now passed since a few scattered individuals in the City of Ottawa and its neighbourhood, became aware that they agreed in dissenting from the views entertained by the mass of the community in regard to theological matters. Something more than mere agreement in dissent drew these persons together; their desires and aims were in a great measure concordant; and naturally they "spoke often one to another," sometimes enquiring when the opportunity would arise

of enjoying the benefit of regular intercourse. They were sensible of the vast advantages resulting from association, and often wished that their number might some day be such as to make it possible for them to hold regular meetings for purposes of mutual instruction and edification. In addition to those to whom I now more especially refer, there were others of similar views, but less favorably situated, as being more isolated, and scarcely in communication with any one to whom they could look for sympathy or even unreservedly express their opinions. I need hardly say, that there is no one who needs sympathy more than the Freethinker. Broadly speaking, he has the world against him, he has the whole force of tradition against him; he has against him to some extent his own organization, moulded as it has been by the institutions and creeds of the past. On the other hand, of course, he can take himself to witness, in the fine language of Matthew Arnold, that he has

“ * * * Loved no darkness
Sophisticated no truth,
Nursed no delusion
Allowed no fear.”*

Still he cannot thoroughly enjoy his liberty alone; and when he sees a hostile world, he wants to know and to feel that some one stands abreast of him,—that he is not all alone. Cut a man off from all congenial companionship, make no demands upon his social faculties, and there is much danger that his moral nature will either wither or harden, that everything will fall away from him, but the impenetrable little nucleus of self. We all need the discipline of common work carried on, not in the spirit of competition, but in the simple spirit

* “Empedocles on Etna.”

of good-fellowship. This alone will place us in right relations with our fellow-men, this alone will enable us to regard the world with all its varied activities in a spirit of broad humanity. Do you say that, in the very act of associating upon special lines, we form ourselves into a set apart from the rest of society? I answer, yes ; but by partaking, ourselves, of the benefits of association, we learn to respect more or less every institution, every influence, that binds men in the bonds of good-fellowship, and educates them in the science of society. We shake off our individualism, and learn that men were made for one another, and that the highest happiness any man can realise is that which comes from social harmony. To have felt this even once, is to have been a man in the highest sense of the world ; to have felt it never is to have missed the chief glory of life and of humanity.

At length to those who were waiting and hoping an opportunity such as they desired presented itself. An attempt which was made to establish a Unitarian Society in this city, brought them together. Some were at first disposed to assist the Unitarian scheme ; but after a free interchange of views, it became apparent that a freer and less formal organization was what they really desired. A very informal meeting of half a dozen persons was held in the street after one of the Unitarian meetings, and it was then and there determined to organize a Liberal Society. What precise shape it would take, no one then knew ; but every member of that little assembly knew that something was wanted ; and all seemed to think that they were agreed as to what that something was. Well, that was eight months ago, and the result of the brief conference then held was the organization of the Progressive Society.

There are several questions concerning our organization which might be asked by some who are present this evening. The first would naturally be, What is your bond of union or what beliefs or disbeliefs do you profess? To this the answer would be, that we have, as a society, no system either of beliefs or disbeliefs, and that our only bond of union is a promise which we make to one another, that we shall "pursue truth in the spirit of charity." Can such a bond as this keep us together? It has done so up to the present, and has enabled us to considerably increase our numbers. There are no signs as yet of any weakening of our organization: all the signs indeed point the other way. Those who attend church—it matters little what church—know how common it is to hear ministers complaining of the lukewarmness and indifference of their congregations; and not unfrequently the congregations have complaints not very dissimilar to make of their pastors. With us, I may say without boasting, the case has, up to the present, been very different. We are all ministers to one another—each man "according to his several ability;" and, whatever we may lack in wisdom or learning, there is no lack of earnestness or interest. We do not delegate to one man the task of teaching us, and throw upon his shoulders the whole responsibility of our spiritual education, sitting mute while, entrenched in his creeds, and safe from all contradiction, he feeds us with such food as he judges convenient for us—and for himself. No, we mutually teach and learn. One ministers some original remarks, another a selected essay, another a piece of poetry, another some strains of music, another a friendly criticism upon what some one else has advanced; and the complaint is never heard that our meetings are devoid of interest or unprofitable. We do not talk for

talking's sake : we talk for the sake of knowing and with a view to working. We desire such an increase of our knowledge, and such a correction of our thoughts, as shall make us efficient servants of the truth, and of every good cause which we may have it in our power to serve.

In regard to our bond of union, it may be remarked that there is nothing in it to exclude any sincere seeker after truth ; and if some of our orthodox friends, accepting our pledge, were to seek to unite themselves with us, they would receive a most hearty welcome. I can think of friends of mine in the churches at this moment whom I would earnestly desire to have in our Society, and who, I feel persuaded, would find a great deal of moral sympathy here. They would have to bear with the free expression of opinions very different from their own ; but, on the other hand, they would have every opportunity of maintaining their own opinions, and why should they not hope to do so with the very best results ? An earnest believer should ask nothing better than a fair field for advocating that which he holds to be the truth.

While we have here no standards of belief, no doctrinal tests whatever, it is true, in point of fact, that as the Society is at present constituted, its members have all seen reason to reject the current forms of religion. Carlyle has described Socinian preachers in New England as quitting their pulpits and saying : " Friends, this is all gone to coloured cob-web, we regret to say." So to us, things that once seemed very grave realities have turned to little better than coloured cob-web ; yet is life none the less real, and truth none the less sure. Whatever was valuable in our former beliefs we can retain ;

but we retain it, not upon authority, but from a perception and conviction of its truth. We try to look honestly at every question that claims our attention ; we shirk no issue, however momentous. We want to know the truth ; and, failing that, the true state of our own minds, the true order of our own thoughts, the true possibilities of belief for us. We depart very far from what some count saving truth, but we retain as the sheet anchor of our minds, a settled conviction that our highest duty lies in being true to ourselves. We have determined to make, once for all, our peace with Nature ; and, from the widest and most candid study of what is, try to discern what ought to be. All duties are founded on relations ; the relations once truly understood, the duties are easily deduced. Those who have never exercised, or do not care to exercise their minds in the discovery of truth will naturally have little faith in the success of the attempt,—as little as he who hid his talent in a napkin had in the results of honest industry. We hold, however, that the blessing which was pronounced upon those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, might equally have been pronounced upon those who hunger and thirst after truth : they *shall be filled* ; they may not escape all error, but they shall escape the perversion of mind that comes of error wilfully clung to, of light wilfully shunned.

But we shall, perhaps, be asked : Can any real contentment of soul be found apart from some form of what is commonly called faith. To this I should be inclined to answer, No ; but then by faith, I do not understand assent to a number of more or less unintelligible doctrines. I would call faith the repose of the soul in certain ascertained moral truths. "What a man

soweth that shall he also reap"—there is a truth, I should say, adapted to sustain any man who sincerely desires to do his best in the world. Such a truth as this does not produce contentment in the mind of one who wants to shirk his duty ; but then, he who wants to shirk his duty should not be helped to contentment. Nor will it give much comfort to that large class of persons who want both to eat their cake and have it ; and who value " the gospel " chiefly because they think they see in it a means whereby this paradox may be realized. Any system, however, which undertakes or promises to equalise things for the wise and unwise, the reckless and the careful, the wasteful and the provident, stands self-condemned. The true worker trusts gladly to the constancy of nature's laws : assure him that he shall reap as he sows, that it shall be measured to him as he measures to others, that the law of the conservation of energy applies in the moral no less than in the physical sphere, and he asks no more. He feels that he has Nature—" the Power that makes for righteousness "—on his side ; and this suffices to give him all the confidence and tranquility of *faith*.

To conclude these remarks, I would just say that our aim to-night is not to make proselytes, but to enjoy social intercourse, and to become better acquainted with one another. We are glad to have some with us on this occasion, who are not with us ordinarily : and if any should desire to know more of our principles, opinions or methods than they can gather this evening, we cordially invite them to our Sunday meetings. We do not claim to possess the truth : we hold all our opinions subject to revision ; we do not regard the leaders of modern thought as one whit more infallible than the leaders of ancient

thought ; we are simply making the best of all the means within our power for rationalising our minds and bringing our lives under the government of right principles. We sympathise with all, wherever they may be, who have similar objects at heart ; and we claim *their* sympathy. The time, we trust, is not far off when community of moral aim will attract men more powerfully than theoretical differences will repel them : and, in that day, the Progressive Society, or something equivalent to it, will be the strongest church in all the land.



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